

Waukegan News Sun, November 15, 2006

Lake County's 2007 budget, including funding for county capital improvement projects and environmental cleanup of Waukegan Harbor, was approved Tuesday by the County Board.

The \$435 million budget shows an increase of 3.4 percent over last year's budget. The county's tax levy, also adopted Tuesday, shows a decrease in the tax rate, but an overall increase of more than 3 percent due to assessment increases.

The new budget includes funding for criminal justice improvements such as staffing for the new work-release addition to the Lake County Jail, and money to accommodate an additional Circuit Court judge. Additional funding for a new branch court and a central permitting facility in Libertyville is also included.

More than \$2 million in the budget will be directed toward an ongoing integrated justice project designed to provide equipment and tools to improve data sharing between judicial and law enforcement agencies across the county.

The budget includes a contribution of more than \$500,000 toward the dredging of Waukegan Harbor, a project to be funded primarily through the federal government but dependent on local matching shares. In addition to the amount in this year's budget, the County Board has agreed to pay up to a total of \$2.5 million for the harbor project.

County Board Chairman Suzi Schmidt of Lake Villa said that federal funding will cover \$24 million of the estimated \$36 million project, but only if Waukegan, the state, the county and private business come up with the matching funds.

"If we don't all come together for the local share, we'll lose it," she said.

Board member Bob Sabonjian of Waukegan said the county's contribution and the cleanup project will make a tangible difference for the city.

"This will help us deal with the perception problems we deal with every day," Sabonjian said. "You're helping us lift our spirits as well as our pocketbooks with this vote."

The county contribution came in response to a request from U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, R-Highland Park, asking the County Board to kick in \$3 million toward the project to help ensure that the local match is reached.

Board member Diana O'Kelly of Mundelein praised Kirk for his work on the issue, "even though Waukegan didn't seem to embrace him in the election (last) Tuesday."

Officials stressed that the harbor cleanup will have environmental and economic development advantages for the entire county.